

Impact of Christian Religion and Religiosity on Sexual Identity Formation, Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Well-being: A Systematic Scoping Review

Authors:

O'Dwyer M¹, Dune T¹, Bidewell J², Liamputtong P¹.

¹ Translational Health Research Institute (THRI), School of Medicine, Western Sydney University, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia, ² School of Health Sciences, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia.

Background:

Research into sexual identity development and adolescent sexual behaviour and wellbeing have often pointed to the positive influence of Christianity and church membership as one of the greatest protective factors for young people. Subsequent research has revealed that church-related health gains from sexual risk avoidance have come at a cost to sexual minority teens experiencing condemnation, exclusion, and associated psychological trauma.

Method:

A systematic review of scholarly literature involving eight databases: Psyc-INFO, PsychLit, ProQuest Central, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Scopus, CINAHL Plus and Infomit was conducted. This research included English-language peer-reviewed studies that explored the influence of Christianity and Christian religion and religiosity on sexual identity development, sexual behaviour and well-being. The review was conducted according to an ecological systems theory (EST) framework.

Results:

The review revealed that Christian religious expression is not becoming more progressive, but rather more polarised, and sexual minority adherents of conservative Christian churches report poor mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation.

Conclusions:

The review revealed several negative psychological outcomes for sexual minority adherents of conservative Christianity. No evidence supported the differentiation in levels of well-being. The use of the EST as a theoretical framework for the investigation was particularly useful in highlighting the near complete absence of research into the influence of family religion and religiosity in the sexual identity development, behaviours and well-being of adolescents. This void provides insight into important areas of further research, particularly the identification of factors contributing to irreconcilable sexual and spiritual identity conflict and distress as opposed to manageable discordance. Such research may contribute to new strategies to support young people facing serious mental health challenges and poor outcomes.